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AUTHOR Phelan, Patricia
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to illustrate how the combined use of qualitative and quantitative methods were necessary in obtaining within this society a clearer understanding of incest. The paper opens with a report of studies carried out on natural father and stepfather incestuous families, and this opens up the issue of the appropriateness of both types of research methodologies. Differences found in the types of incest, and responses of families to treatment, illustrate findings that would not have been uncovered had either methodology been used to the exclusion of the other. The argument is made that the dichotomization of quantitative and qualitative techniques is both misleading and unnecessary. The methodological issues are rather ones of judgment about what will yield needed information in a given investigation. The paper also gives some attention to the related issue of which methodological approaches are appropriate when a fresh line of inquiry is beginning in a field; and mention is made of an obvious issue that arises in dealing with incest--the handling of "sensitive" research problems. (Author/JAZ)

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THE USEFULNESS OF QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE METHODS: STUDYING INCEST IN AMERICA

Patricia Phelan

Medical Anthropology Program
University of California,
San Francisco

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Patricia Phelan, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

The paper opens with a report of studies carried out on natural father and stepfather incestuous families, and this opens up the issue of the appropriateness of both types of research methodologies. Differences found in the types of incest, and responses of families to treatment, illustrate findings that would not have been uncovered had either methodology been used to the exclusion of the other. The argument is made that the dichotomization of quantitative and qualitative techniques is both misleading and unnecessary. The methodological issues are rather ones of judgment about what will yield needed information in a given investigation. The paper gives some attention too, to the related issue of which methodological approaches are appropriate when a fresh line of inquiry is beginning in a field; and mention is made of an obvious issue that arises in dealing with incest -- the handling of "sensitive" research problems.

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how the combined use of qualitative and quantitative methods were necessary in obtaining a clearer understanding of the process of incest within this society. The contention is that the use of one methodology at the exclusion of the other would not only have reduced the results but would have actually obscured important information. Each method raised questions that were then pursued by the other.

The debate in the literature about the epistemological basis of these two methodologies has been persistent. (Smith & Heshusius: 1986) Not infrequently they have been dichotomized, with the apparent assumption that the epistemological differences force researchers to choose one or the other accepting the imputed advantages of one with a loss of the imputed advantages of the other. My position is that we can, and often need to combine methods, shifting frames of reference between the two orientations. Like Goetz and Le Compte, I do not see the two as "mutually exclusive dichotomies." (1984:7) The study I talk about here is an example of generating propositions through qualitative means, verifying them quantitatively, and moving back again to qualitative methods in order to build a coherent and understandable picture of the phenomena under study.

The problem was to find out what incest is and to identify the systems of meaning surrounding this particular rule violation. The study was to be an ethnographic account of the process of incest within this society.

The first task was to identify a sufficient number of discovered cases of incest so that the participants and others in

their social context could serve as informants. Such a pool was located in an educational treatment program which, at the time of the study, was comprised of about 500 families. A majority of the cases involved sexual activity between fathers and daughters and stepfathers and stepdaughters. From the beginning it was quite obvious that the sensitivity of the subject matter would require that an unusal degree of rapport be established with the informants--not only the incest participants but also with persons within the cultural milieu of the treatment community. The philosophy of the program in general, was not conducive to access by "outside" researchers. In no uncertain terms I was informed that surveys, questionnaires, the administration of psychological inventories or tests, or any other "obtrusive" procedures were completely antithetical to community standards. Access was possible only by adopting the role of participant and this meant becoming an intern counselor. And it was only after several months of proving my commitment and demonstrating "unobtrusive" behavior that the role of participant/observer became legitimate and accepted.

Entree having been accomplished, the early months involved participation in all levels of activity--family and group counseling sessions, attendance at formal and informal program activities, and involvement in the self-help component. Detailed field-notes were used to document these events. In addition, interviews with counselors, the director of treatment and training and other staff persons and the collection of archival and written information generated a wealth of qualitative data

which was vital in identifying significant concepts and generating hypotheses and hunches for further exploration.

Like other ethnographies, the character of the study and the areas of focus evolved as the study progressed. Initially the program had been conceived of simply as the setting for the study. Its utility was seen as the place where informants could be found--people who had participated in incest--and might be persuaded to be informants for an ethnographic reconstruction of the process. For several reasons it became apparent that the treatment program could not be so easily or trivially dealt with.

For example, in order to talk to individuals who had been directly involved in the act of incest it was necessary to penetrate the treatment community. The program had developed its own internal social reality which included a language for discussing incest. The language was used by the participants--they had been taught how to talk about and explain what they did. Ideas about what incest is, what causes it to occur, and how it should be treated were explicit. It therefore became crucial to identify and understand the meanings generated within the community since these meanings were destined to play a prominent role in the incestuous participants' retrospective view of what had happened. Further, counselors and clients alike underwent a powerful and systematic course of socialization which, it became apparent, would fundamentally influence the kinds of information which was received. Thus the treatment program also became an important focus of the investigation, elevated from its place as a "setting" and included conceptually as a part of the process.

About a year into the study meanings about incest generated within the community and the mechanisms by which persons were being socialized were becoming clear. Also, my presence was routine enough so that it was now possible to approach some of the incestuous participants directly--something that had actually been prohibited by program personnel a year previously.

For a number of reasons I decided that autobiographical life histories would yield the most comprehensive information and would most closely match the manner in which the mothers and fathers were accustomed to revealing information about the incestuous events. In the program a prominent belief is that incest is not simply a sexual act that occurs at a particular point in time but rather something that is forecast in the histories of the mothers and fathers, the structure and dynamics of the family, and the social context in which the family exists.

Initially the selection of informants was unsystematic and included those individuals with whom the greatest amount of rapport had been established and who were willing to participate. However, after a number of interviews had been completed I began to suspect that the process that occurred and the meanings attached to the events might in fact be different for people of varying degrees of relationship. It seemed as if natural fathers and stepfathers were talking about what they had done in slightly different terms. For example, one stepfather told of being in love with his stepdaughter and described fantasies of marrying her. Several natural fathers on the other hand were inclined to make statements indicating an objectification of the children

(i.e., I guess I thought of her as a masturbatory object."). As a consequence, I made sure that future interviews included both natural fathers and stepfathers and that I probed specifically for the type of sexual activity that had taken place. A total of 20 interviews with mothers and fathers were conducted and hunches that there might in fact be differences in the process of incest in these two family types became stronger. At this point it was still impossible to conclude anything for the sample was small and unsystematic. However, the purpose here had not been to select a random sample but rather to identify informants who were willing to talk about what they had gone through in order to begin to generate hypotheses.

Upon completing the indepth interviews I felt the need to confirm or disconfirm my hunches in a more systematic manner. Therefore one hundred and two natural father and stepfather cases were identified--this included all of the families with whom the counselors had worked during the previous year. I had learned that the program therapists had detailed information about the sexual behavior of their cases and the context in which the behavior had occurred. Using intensive interviews with the counselors I was able to extract detailed descriptions of the circumstances of the incestuous relationships and build a quantitative picture indicating that differences in the two family types, for this particular sample, did in fact exist. (The method of interviewing the counselors was chosen because at the time of the study it was not feasible to conduct interviews with over 330 individuals. Also the therapists had seen hundreds

of families previously and therefore were able to provide a comparative view of the circumstances of the incest.)

It is important to mention here that the emphasis and philosophy of the program on the same "humanistic treatment" for all and the belief that incestuous behavior stems from the same fundamental causes for varieties of perpetrators had precluded the search for variation in terms of relationship and/or family structure. The treatment model does not differentiate family type or relationship of perpetrator to victim with respect to therapy. All clients receive individual and family counseling and varieties of group counseling. Interviews with program personnel earlier in the study indicated that almost all the staff and therapists were convinced that there were no systematic differences in either what occurred or in the reasons why it occurred between persons of different relationship. At this point in the study, had only qualitative data been collected and analyzed the differences found in the two family types would not have been uncovered but would have been obscured by the layers of meaning within the community.

The quantitative analysis yielded statistically significant differences on the following variables. One-half of the natural fathers involved multiple daughters--in other words, molested more than one child in the family whereas only one in five of the stepfathers included more than one victim. (There were no differences in the number of available daughters in the two family types.) Further, more than one-half of the natural father cases involved full intercourse whereas only slightly more

than one-quarter of the stepfather cases had progressed to the point of full sexual consummation. And finally, natural fathers more frequently began molesting their daughters when they had reached adolescence whereas stepfathers more frequently began the sexual activity when the children were younger (pre-adolescent).

The quantitative differences found when the two types of families were compared supported the supposition that the process of incest in structurally different families may vary. Certainly the results are striking. But they are also sterile unless they are interwoven with possible meanings and interpretations of the events found in the the qualitative analysis. By combining the two types of data we are able to explore some possible explanations.

For example, the differences in the number of children involved for natural fathers and stepfathers may be related to the definitions of the events and the meanings attached thereto by the participants. Some stepfathers may see their stepdaughters as desirable and available females, define the relationship as a "love affair," and act in accordance with the conventional notions about what an affair involves (courtship, persuasion, etc.) On the other hand, some natural fathers (more frequently than stepfathers) may view the children as <u>their</u> possessions and courtship or seduction as less necessary. Also, daughters may be viewed more frequently by natural fathers as extensions of themselves, thereby providing for them, a nondistinguishable pool from which to choose, in order to meet their needs. Thus some stepfathers may be pursuing a single girl, more often than not, who happens to be their stepdaughter.

Natural fathers may, on the other hand, be using what they view as extensions of themselves for their own need-gratification and, if one such extension will serve that purpose, why not another (or, even yet, another)?

The finding that natural fathers more often engaged in full intercourse with their daughters than did the stepfathers at first glance belies the presumption that the incest taboo operates more effectively to prevent a full sexual consummation in cases of blood relationship. On the other hand, it could be that the incest taboo operates so effectively that when the taboo is broken a more complex rationalization system must be constructed therby allowing for more serious types of sexual behavior to occur. In other words, once the taboo is broken, a reconstruction as to its meaning may operate to endorse more serious types of sexual behavior in the mind of some of the father perpetrators.

The differences in the physical "process" of incest in these two family types also raise other possibilities with respect to differences in the meanings attached to the activities by the participants. For example, notions about role relationships between parents and children are fundamentally embedded in American culture. Natural parents often feel they have the major responsibility for (and authority over) their children and parental authority, control and power has been little questioned except in unusual circumstances. Included are notions of "ownership." A stepfather's children may not be regarded as "really" his.

To consider that there may be differences in the process of incest in structurally different families may not at this point seem too profound. However, at the time of this study this possibility had not been considered. As mentioned previously, not only did treatment facilities around the country treat families in an undifferentiated manner but most assumed that there were no differences. Further in nearly all studies of incestuous behavior, authors had lumped people in these two categories of relationship together. Those authors who had broken their samples into case types frequently failed to analyze the results by natural father and stepfather relationship.

The quantitative differences found in this investigation would not have emerged had they not been preceded by the gathering of qualitative data. Further, the quantitative differences alone have little meaning. It was necessary to return to ideas which emerged in the qualitative analysis to begin to build a coherent picture of the process of incest in these two family types. The interpretations suggested here are currently being explored more systematically as this line of inquiry continues. Qualitative methods are being used to expand on the meaning and interpretation of the events by the participants while types of behaviors across the two groups are being quantified. The use of both methodologies is necessary as we continue to investigate the possibility that the meaning of the events in structurally different families may in fact be related to the types of behavior which occur.

This is not a case of simply supplementing one methodology with another, but rather an example of having to move back and forth in order to begin to understand a sensitive area of human behavior.

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